

## 5 Times Steve Worried About the Kids by oldwounds

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**Summary:**

And the one time they worried about him.

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Or, a series of instances where Steve thinks of a bunch of kids as his family.

# 1. Dustin

## Notes for the Chapter:

Hey!! I have a lot of feelings and zero self control so this happened even though I am suppose to be writing other things!! To lay out the structure from the get go: each chapter, excluding the last one, will be focused on Steve & one of the kids.

It's two in the morning when Steve hears the phone go off, and out of instinct, he rolls over on his side—the ripe, dark hues of purple and blue along his body making him sharply inhale—before grabbing it from nightstand with a loud groan. He's made it a habit to keep the house phone in his room, which he knows aggravates his father, but he doesn't care much about what his dad says most of the time, especially when the reason he keeps it in his room *far* outweighs the wrath of his douche-bag dad.

“Hello?” Steve’s voice is hoarse, scratches the back of his throat, and he rubs at his eyes and uses one of his elbows to elevate himself a little. He squints and peers around his room, the expression on his face making the bruises along his cheekbones and eyes get sore all over again, his furniture barely registering for what they are as the darkness casts them in pitch black shadows.

“Steve?” It’s Dustin, but the voice doesn’t bring him a mix of annoying comfort like it usually would. No — it only makes him sit up even further to turn his lamp on, because Dustin sounded like he was crying, his voice strained and low and tired and scared.

After...everything had happened, Steve was surprised that the kids still wanted to hang out with him, and was even more surprised that he didn't throw the idea of chilling with a bunch of snot-nosed children out the window right away. He pretended like they were just annoying little rugrats at first (and they still are, by the way), but somewhere along the line it started bordering affection, and now it feels like he's involuntarily adopted five children.

“Dustin? Are you okay?” Steve asks softly, hiding the apprehensive

concern in his voice, for the kids sake. He knows he doesn't have an answer yet—knows that Dustin could be upset for a veritable fuckton of reasons—but it still doesn't stop the irrational thoughts about Dustin calling him at two A.M to let him know that the Demogorgon was back and that there was danger headed their way. It doesn't stop him from mentally going through the checklist of stuff he can remember the location of—bat, in the trunk. Keys, on the holder downstairs. Fuel for a fire, garage. Lighter, jean pockets.

And, *jesus*, it certainly doesn't stop Steve from wanting to clutch his stomach at Dustin ringing him up because he himself was in danger, or that one of the other kids were dead, or that Hopper was dead, or Joyce, or Jonathan, or *Nancy*.

Nancy.

*Shit, Nancy...*

"No, I'm not. I..." Dustin starts with a shaky breath, like he's closing his eyes and trying to steady something.

With those four words alone, the worst ideas come hurdling at Steve, and he ignores the urge to throw up as he gets to his feet and starts to look for his jeans. "What did you do this time? Are you safe? Where are you? Let me come get you. Why are you even out at 2am? I swear if you're gonna make me have to talk to your mom about your safety, I will. Don't think I won't hesitate, Henderson, cause I swear—"

"What?" Dustin hiccups, interrupting him. "No, no. Steve, I'm fine in *that* way."

Steve's grasp on the phone gets a little less rough, but even with the reassurance, the feeling in his stomach doesn't leave, so he starts pacing without end, because if his limbs are moving, the anxiety goes away—or at least he can pretend it's gone.

"God, you absolute *shithead*. You—" Steve catches himself quickly, shutting his mouth and stopping himself from uttering the rest of his sentence. Saying '*you scared the hell out of me*' felt too...well, he doesn't know what. He does care about the kid, but Steve already learned the hard way that he either can't keep the people he cares

about close enough to him for them to stay, or just disappoints them until it becomes too much.

And Steve? He doesn't want to disappoint Dustin. He *never* wants to disappoint Dustin. What if the kid gets too close to him and he screws it up? What if he ruins Dustin the way he ruins everything else? The kid already looked up to him far too much for his own good, and that makes Steve absolutely terrified.

"Nevermind," He runs his hand through his hair, repeating his question from earlier. "Are you okay?"

"Yeah..." Dustin snuffles. "Yeah. Mostly. I just had a Nightmare about...y'know," The way Dustin says it, like he's scared Steve might crack a joke, makes him frown, but he doesn't say anything about it and lets Dustin continue. "I wanted to tell my mom this shit, but you and I both know that I can't, and I knew that I wouldn't be able to fall back asleep until I calmed down, so, uh..." Dustin trails off, sounding a bit embarrassed. "I called you because you were the first person I could think of."

And Steve has no idea what to say to the latter part of that sentence, so he doesn't say anything about that at all.

Which fits, really, because what *does* he say?

It's not like he's very good with comfort. He'd like to think he is, but most of the time it just involved the other person venting and Steve incoherently trying to console them and screwing it up horribly.

But trying *does* count, right?

*Right?*

Yeah, it has to.

"Do you want to talk about it? Maybe letting it out will, y'know...help?" Steve figures he can stop pacing now, collapsing onto his bed and holding in a loud grunt when his ribs pulse with fire.

Shit, he's gotta be more careful or his bruises wont heal.

"It was about the demogorgon," Dustin confesses instantly. "I know it's been three weeks—" *had it really been that long?* "—and I should get over it, but it was..." Dustin's voice is starting to waver. "It scared me, alright? The demogorgon came back for us, except this time it killed everyone in its path. Lucas, Mike, Max, Hopper, Will, *you*—" He pauses. A breath. "—it just killed everyone. *Everyone!* And I was left alone because I couldn't stop it. I couldn't..." His voice cracks, and Steve's heart goes tight at how broken he sounds. "God. This shit is stupid, I know."

"It's far from stupid," Steve says, and then goes silent for a moment, looking over at his dresser to see the goggles he wore when he quite literally sprinted through underground tunnels with four children who he was constantly worried about, and then shifted in his spot. "Nothing about this is stupid."

"Then why do I feel stupid?"

Steve knows why, or at least has a good idea why. It's because Dustin feels like he's doing this alone, that he's the only one getting nightmares.

But he isn't, because Steve has them too.

They came slowly at first, like tiny flashbacks or little jumps to keep him alert during the day. But then they escalated to far worse scenarios; scenarios where Steve had no control.

Sometimes, it's about what happened last year. Steve arrives too late to Jonathan's house and him and Nancy are both mangled corpses in the living room. Other times, it's about the tunnels. He never gets the kids out fast enough, and for some twisted, evil reason, the dogs get the kids but not him, and he's left there in blood and trembles on his knees until he wakes up.

He's never blatantly admitted it to anyone, yeah, but that didn't make it not true, and if it's to help the kid, then... *to hell with his ego.* "If you feel stupid, then you're calling me stupid, 'cause I have them too."

Dustin snuffles again, and Steve can hear the relief in his voice when he speaks, the kind of relief that you feel when you're going through

something and realize someone understands it. "Really?"

"Yeah, dude. And if you really think it's stupid, we can be stupid together, but it's totally normal. You've been through a lot, and it's okay to not feel okay." There's truth in that, but there's also hypocrisy, because he does believe that Dustin's been through a lot and is allowed to have nightmares, but when it comes to himself? Steve feels like having the nightmares aren't justified. He hasn't been through as much as the others.

Why should he get help when they all need it so much more?

"But—"

"If you're about to call your nightmares unreasonable, they aren't," Steve starts to absentmindedly run his fingers along the back of the phone, scoffing at the very idea. "You're a kid, and you've seen and been through more things that any kid should have to go through. You've helped saved Hawkins twice, and if you get nightmares because of it, then it's okay, alright? I'm being serious."

"Yeah?" Dustin sounds so small. So unsure.

"Yeah," Steve reassures. "If you really think about it, you're kind of like a..." He flounders, trying to find the right words in his head. "You're like a superhero."

"What the *shit*—" Dustin scoffs. "A superhero? really? How do I even remotely compare?"

"Well for starters, you're tough as bones," Steve replies, "You're selfless. *And* it doesn't hurt that you're brave as hell. All you kids are. You marched straight into an otherworldly underground hole to help that girl..."

"Eleven."

Steve snaps his fingers in an '*ah-hah!*' gesture. "Yes, right. Her. Look, point is — you guys saved a lot of people that day. If that isn't heroism at its finest—"

"But didn't you do that, too?"

"What?" Steve's stills.

"You just said that *'us kids'* are brave and selfless and tough, but you went down there *with* us, Steve. That means you're also brave and selfless and tough." Dustin states. "That means you're a superhero, too."

Steve blinks, opening and closing his mouth as he repeatedly goes to say something and then quickly second guesses it. He doesn't know why that makes his throat clog up the way it does, or why it makes him so genuinely confused that he loses himself for a moment, but what he does know is that he can't form a comprehensive thought to that.

The silence on the phone is deafening, and he can tell Dustin is starting to grow anxious because he begins to quietly ramble on to himself about something that Steve isn't focusing on enough to hear, since he's just mindlessly staring at the clock that reads 2:42AM.

Or rather, that *was* what he was doing for a solid minute, until, without any warning, Dustin's voice comes back like a train smashing into him full force.

"...you hear me? Steve!"

"Yeah?" Even though he jumps, the reply is indifferent, and he shakes his head as if to snap himself out of it. "I mean—*shit*—yeah. Sorry. I was thinking about—" *Nothing. Absolutely nothing. I'm losing it.* "—stuff."

"Uh huh." Dustin drags the words out. "Are you okay?"

Steve doesn't miss a beat. "Course I am. You?"

"Yeah, I'm—*son of a bitch*—" Steve winces when he hears something clang on the other end, and Dustin starts apologizing profusely, explaining that he got out of bed to grab some water and just spilled it everywhere.

Steve snorts. "Nice going, dickhead."

"Shut up."

"I will," Steve rolls his eyes, but there's a smile on his face. "But only as soon as I know you're good to go. I can stay on this line all night, Henderson. Try me."

"Ew," Dustin pretends to be disgusted. "I'll pass. I'm calm now. Goodnight."

Steve smiles faintly. "Night."

Dustin starts fluffing his pillows on the other end, and Steve goes to end the call before he hears: "Oh, *wait!* Steve?!"

He brings the phone back up, alarmed. "What? What is it? What managed to happen in the zero point five seconds I was away from the goddamn phone—"

"Nothing," He can hear the smile in Dustin's voice. "I just wanted to say thank you."

Before Steve can say that Dustin doesn't need to thank him—that that's the last thing he should be doing—the line goes dead, and Steve sits there and thinks about what happened for a few moments before deciding he should get back to sleep, too.

And even though he knows he's going to get a handful of shit tomorrow morning from his dad about late night calls and waking the whole house up, he can't find it in himself to care.

Because he knew the reason he kept the phone in his room was a good one, anyway.



## 2. Will

### Notes for the Chapter:

Okay this is longer than it needs to be because I got caught up in details and lots of story telling and its just like...damn bitch?? get to the point???

ANYWAY thank you so much for the feedback this has been getting!! I know its been 3 months (I really...dropped off the face of this earth huh??) but exams were stressful and i slept a lot during winter break + the new semester of university really....uhhhhhhhhhhhh ANYWAY.

I've been extremely tired, but I promise I'll get back to as many comments as I can, and additionally try to get the rest of this finished. I'm so immensely grateful. <3

[also if there r spelling errors i apologize im sleepy rn]

If there's one thing Steve notices often, it's Will.

And it isn't the cheesy, lopsided grin Will sports every time he see's Steve, or the way he seems to be the most gentle and quiet amongst the nitwits, or even the way Will's eyes light up in excitement when they're all playing D&D (Steve's still learning the rules, and so far he's dubbed it the *'Over-the-top but Surprisingly Interesting Creative Writing Game for Geeks'* ). No — it's how small Will is.

He doesn't mean height wise, either.

Steve first noticed a few days after The Gate closed. The five of them were in Wheeler's basement, because somehow Steve got roped into hanging out with them (If you ask him, it was mostly due to Dustins persistent whining), but then again, it wasn't like he really knew how to say no to them, anyway.

Mike was venting to Dustin and Lucas about how it was unfair that he wouldn't be able to see Eleven until the Snow Ball, and Max was holding a giant D&D rulebook that was basically her size, gazing about the pages with wide, confused eyes, when Will finally arrived, trudging down the stairs with small smile. They all paused to look up at him, and Steve's attention immediately zeroed in on the hollowness around the Byers kid's eyes, and the thinning of his face and arms, and the way his clothes seemed to engulf him entirely.

Steve had kicked himself off the wall he was leaning on as Will reached the last step, and when he gave Byers a pat on the back as he barreled past Steve and into the embracing hugs of his friends, Steve could feel the bones on his shoulder blades jutting out. The better side of him instantly wanted to bring it up, but he decided to not say anything, because he figured that being, well, *possessed by a monster from another dimension* would make anyone lose a couple of pounds.

But that was a month and a half ago.

Will hasn't gotten any bigger.

Steve's been meaning to talk to him about it, or maybe even Joyce, but *Jesus*, trying to put it discreetly and not blatantly wave the subject in Will's face—because he knows it'll either embarrass him or make him shut Steve out—is like trying to solve one of the complex math questions Steve has laying on his desk at home. The only difference is that one of them makes him want to pull his hair out. The other just scares him.

He wants to say it's just him overreacting (he tends to do that nowadays), or that his eyes are playing tricks and Will is actually at a healthy weight for his height and age, but somewhere deep down he knows he's not, and it's constantly at the back of his head like some sort of fire alarm, blaring sirens and flashing red anytime he's reminded of it.

Which is probably why it's currently going off in his head right now.

Everyone's gathered around the dinner table at the Henderson's, hands reaching over the table to grab onto plates filled with food as everyone takes their seats to eat. Lucas, Dustin, and Mike are

gathered on one side of the table, only maintaining five minutes of civility before breaking out into an argument about what species Max should be in D&D, and Steve is sitting parallel to them, wedged between Max and Will.

As for Ms. Henderson? She retreated to her room a few minutes ago, mumbling something about having already eaten, which left Steve alone with the responsibility of watching over the kids.

And yeah, It's not like he isn't use to the task, but there's food involved in this scenario, and he knows how much Dustin likes to threaten to throw things at his friends.

Beside Steve, Will is quiet, even more so than usual—shying away from eye contact and only answering to Steve when he asks him if he wants some water. Will nods, watches him pour the clear liquid in his glass, smiles faintly at him, and then goes back to picking up his fork, which is something Steve fails to understand the significance of. He doesn't know *why* Will pretends like he's going to use it, because Steve's been eyeing the kid for a solid ten minutes and all he's done is play with his mashed potatoes, not go anywhere near the carrots, and discard the hunk of baked chicken on the side of the plate.

Yeah. Overreacting his ass.

"Max is obviously a half-orc!" Dustin suddenly shouts matter of fact, waving his hands to gesture to her from across the table. "I mean, look at her!"

Max leans back a little, the fork that's halfway to her mouth and carrying a piece of chicken freezing in the air before she offensively mutters, "What does *that* mean?" but her voice promptly goes unnoticed, because Mike and Lucas have already started to counter his point, the three of them using wide hand gestures and aggressively whispering to each other—or at least *trying* to, but conclusively and horrendously failing.

"She's an Elf!" He hears Lucas shout out amidst the many things that are going on in their corner of the table, Steve watching in distress because he knows if something starts flying he's gonna have to get over there at the speed of light and end it.

“You’re only saying that because elves are *pretty*.” Mike deadpans.

“So what? She’s pretty!” Lucas says, and Max sinks down in her chair and flushes.

Steve shoves a carrot into his mouth, trying not to visibly look amused so she doesn’t get even more embarrassed. They’re bickering too much for it to be heading in a good direction, and Steve knows the best way to shut them up is to shove a bunch of distractors in their faces and hope to God they don’t notice it’s a plan (but Steve’s never done that, *obviously*), but he currently can’t exactly think of something to distract them with.

Steve’s only choice is to actually diffuse it with words, so he rolls his shoulders, parting his lips so he can tell them to knock it off, but stops when he feels Will slightly jump in the chair next to him, Steve’s gaze immediately gravitating towards the young Byers kid. He lets his confused gaze roam over Will expression, and he can see that he looks notably tired, dark blue bags forming under his eyes and his cheekbones more prominent than any other day. Will shakily puts his fork down and leans back on his chair, biting on the inner sides of his cheeks.

Steve wonders what’s up with him, and it isn’t until Will glances up from behind his bangs, looking at the boys and wincing again when Dustin gets too loud, that Steve realizes what’s going on.

He instantly frowns. Last year, after Jonathan’s house, he use to be terrified of loud noises, too.

“*Hey!* ” Steve makes sure not to say it so loud that it startles Will, but loud enough for the boys to hear, resorting to putting his utensils down and clapping to get their attention. The incoherent arguing comes to a halt, and they all look at Steve like he’s just personally attacked them, to which he rolls his eyes at.

Drama queens. All of them.

“How about instead of arguing about what Max should be, you let her decide for herself? She can be a...” Steve trails off, realizing he can’t recall any of the D&D species, “Halfblood,” he starts off slowly,

their flat expressions showing that he isn't going in the right direction. "Dwarfling...?" And Dustin's giving him a look of betrayal now. Shit, nope. That wasn't right.

"Okay, you know what? It doesn't even matter right now. Just shut your traps, sit down, and eat." He orders, Dustin begrudgingly stomping to his seat and making a point to give Steve a look before settling down.

God. If he doesn't have a Dustin, Will, Lucas, Mike, or Max-related ulcer before next year, it'll be one hell of a miracle.

The next ten minutes go by without a hitch, and it would've stayed that way if it weren't for Lucas, who kicked Dustin under the table and prompted Dustin to grab his glass of water and threaten to pour it all over Lucas' head for it. Thankfully, Steve can stop it before it happens, nearly bolting to the other side and yanking the glass away from Dustin.

"That is *not* how you solve problems!" Steve scolds, placing the cup back down on the table.

"It's not like you solve them any better," Dustin quips back rather quickly, crossing his arms over his chest. "Haven't you beaten the shit out of Will's brother before?"

"Actually," Mike leans over the table to get a better view of Steve, "From what I was told, Jonathan totally kicked Steve's ass. His face was a mess."

Steve's face falls flat. This conversation took a turn. "That...it was... my *point* is that there are better ways to solve things and-" Steve waves his hands in the air, almost as if he's trying to fathom more words from his movements, before sighing heavily. "Christ. Nevermind. Just stop playing around with water or *I'll* be the one dumping it on *your* heads."

He ignores the mutters that break out from the three as he returns to his seat, the rest of their dinner being spent in relatively moderate noise levels, the clink of forks and spoons against the plate being the most prominent noise in the room.

“Hey,” Will suddenly says from where he’s situated after a while, voice low and soft. Steve pries his attention away from Max, who’s throwing the boys a confused and exasperated glance from something they’ve said, the look on her face expressing that she’s definitely rethinking her decision to agree to actually join in on playing the game, and turns to face Will.

He’s getting up from his seat, carrying the plate with his untouched meal, and this time Steve doesn’t try to hide the fact that he notices, narrowing his eyes at the food and then catching Will’s eyes.

The kid looks away, towards the kitchen, refusing to look at Steve. “I’m gonna go put my dishes away and wash my plate.” And then he’s zooming past Steve and making a beeline for the kitchen, disappearing around the corner at light speed.

Steve shifts his jaw, leaning forward in his chair and placing his utensils on the plate. “I’ll be right back,” he announces, eyeing the gang. “Do *not* kill each other while I’m gone.”

He doesn’t have high hopes, but he’s sure that at least Max will listen. She seems to be the only one there with rational thought.

Steve navigates his way to the kitchen, spotting Will silently emptying his food in the garbage, his fork clinking against the plate with every scrape. Steve leans against the doorframe with his arms crossed, just watching with squinted eyes, and then Will turns around and freezes.

“Oh, hey.” Is all he says, awkwardly shuffling past Steve and towards the sink.

“Hey.” Steve tilts his chin. “Can I talk to you about something?”

Will turns on the faucet, letting the water run for a little longer than it should before hesitantly nodding. Good. *Good*. It’s not like Steve was gonna take a no, anyway.

“Is everything alright?” Will questions, grabbing the sponge.

Steve lets out a breath as he takes a few steps closer, but it’s somewhere between a scoff and a laugh. “I should be asking *you*

that.”

Will side eyes him, and he tries to mask the panic in his eyes but Steve catches it before it's gone. “Huh? What are you talking about?”

“You *know* what I'm talking about, Byers,” Steve says flatly. “ Why haven't you been eating?”

The tension in the air grows thick, because Steve doesn't know what kind answer he's going to get, or if he's going to get one at all.

He almost wants to take it back, to just tell Will to forget it because maybe he's crossing boundaries he shouldn't be. But he doesn't, because his need to understand what's wrong overpowers him, so he waits, and after a few seconds Will's voice echoes across the room.

“I...” It's a bit louder than the sound of the running water, Steve instantly righting up his posture and leaning in a bit more. Will places his plate on the drying rack and turns off the faucet, sighing heavily before spinning around to face Steve.

He stays silent for a while, and Steve almost thinks that he's just not going to answer him, but then Will clears his throat. “This is going to sound crazy...” he starts, voice wavering as he shifts his weight, “but...” and then he starts explaining to Steve what's going on with him.

After getting the monster expelled from his body, Will noticed that his sense of taste hasn't been the same. No matter what he eats, it feels like cotton in his mouth and tastes like ash, and sometimes it's gotten so bad he's thrown it up. He hasn't told his mom or Jonathan because he doesn't want to worry them any more he already has, and additionally doesn't want to spur any more trips to the doctors, so he's been keeping it to himself. Steve frowned and nodded along with Will's story, making sure Will knew he was listening, and when he was finished, the kid looked like a giant weight was lifted off of him, a few snuffles emitting from his mouth as he raised up his hand to wipe his nose.

The first thing Steve thinks is that Will is right. It *is* crazy. But Steve doesn't question it, because he knows the second he throws any

doubt out there that it'll make Will feel like his feelings and problems are invalid, and that's the last thing Steve wants to do.

What he *wants* to do is help. He won't sit there and know this is happening to a good kid and not do anything about it. So, Will says this is a problem that's happening? Then, okay, it's happening, and Steve believes him.

"Do you know what can't you eat?" Steve asks.

"A lot of things." Will's body sags. "I know that when I eat chicken it's the worst."

Steve's starts to nervously drum his fingers against the countertop. "Okay," he pauses to think. "Okay. What *can* you eat?"

Will frowns. "I don't know."

Crap. Alright.

Steve knits his eyebrows, tapping his foot against the floor as he gets the cogs in his brain to work. He can't go to Will's mom because trust would be completely thrown out the window, can't go to any of the adults because they'd definitely make him go back to lab where Will will be poked and prodded at to no end, and there's obviously a reason Will hasn't told the other kids, so Steve can't do that either.

Which means Steve has to solve the issue of a young boy, an issue that came from another dimension might he add, all by himself, with his outstanding 2.5 GPA.

Great.

He's totally got this.

"So everything you've been eating for the past month and a half has tasted like this...ash stuff, right?"

Will nods.

"Can you remember all the foods you've eaten since it all started?"



“Well...yeah. Mom’s not a very diverse cooker. We’ve had a lot of the same things.”

“Great, so here’s the deal,” Steve says, pushing himself off the counter and squatting down in front of Will. “I’m gonna need you to make a list of all the things you’ve eaten since the day after everything happened. We’re gonna avoid them.”

“Okay...” Will speaks slowly, “But what are you-”

“We’re going to see what you can taste and work our way up from there. It could be like a chain effect thing. Once you can actually taste something, anything, the ash taste might gradually go away. But first you need to find something you can actually taste—kind of like a key to a lock. You with me so far?” Steve explains, waiting for Will to nod again before continuing on, “I’m gonna pick you up on most days so we can try different joints around town, see if we can find something that isn’t appalling to your new found taste.”

And now Will looks unsure. “That sounds...”

“Outrageous? I know.” Steve slightly tilts his head, “But it’s plan A, kid. Trial and Error. Maybe this will work, and maybe it won’t, but if it doesn’t, we’re going to keep trying, alright?” Steve sticks his hand out, “Together.”

Will pauses, searching Steve’s face with his eyes before slowly taking Steve’s hand and nodding.

“Together.”

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“I told you this wouldn’t work. I haven’t thrown up this fast before,” Will speaks in between gags, Steve waiting idly by the sink as he stares at the stall that Will locked himself inside of. Steve had tried to knock on it a few times so he could help Will, but after a while he had stopped being so persistent.

The first place Steve took Will to was a small cafe near the middle school, the warm and cozy environment being a pleasant contrast against the biting wind that flooded the streets of Hawkins. Steve ordered something that Will hadn't had in the past two months, a fancy sounding omelette, and the second Will had put it in his mouth, he was rushing towards the bathroom.

"It's the first try." Steve states, hearing Will rolling the toilet paper out of its holder. "There are tons of other things out there, Will."

"Yeah but..." Will coughs, "how do you even know this is going to work?"

"I don't," Steve replies honestly, placing his balled up hands on his waist. "But this is the only idea I have, man. It has to work." A pause. "*It has to.*"

Will opens the stall door, a frown on his face. "And if it doesn't?"

"It will."

"I said if-"

"*It will.*"

And although Steve gets a worried glance and shaky exhale paired with a nod in response, he supposes that's enough.

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It's getting really, *really* hard to stay optimistic.

It isn't even like Steve's a very optimistic person by nature, either. He's been putting up a front, encouraging the kid to keep prevailing even though it's been just under a week and nothing worth noting has happened, but he's not so sure if it's going anywhere, anymore.

He doesn't think Will has any hope left, either.

Before today, Steve might have thought otherwise, but the two of them are sat in a restaurant, and when Steve has to deal with the startling surprise of Will abruptly getting up and making a beeline for the exit when the third thing he puts in his mouth still doesn't prompt anything, he knows it's a wrong assumption.

Steve runs after him—after hurriedly paying the bill, of course—getting a little worried when he exits the restaurant and doesn't see Will right away, but he eventually spots him on a bench across the street, facing the park that lay ahead of him.

Steve lets out a loud exhale, his breath turning into a light fog in the winter air and disappearing above his head as he makes his way over.

“Will,” He calls when he reaches him, and then takes a seat on the bench. “Will? Come on, talk to me.”

He waits a beat. Then two. Then three. And then on the fourth beat, he hears the unmistakable sound of sniffing, and Will reaches up to wipe his nose and eyes, keeping his gaze trained to the ground.

*Damn it.*

Steve doesn't know what to do. Sure, he wasn't too bad at handling Dustin, but this is *Will*. This is the kid who refuses to break, the kid who can put a smile on his face despite everything he's been through, the kid who's kind and has the biggest goddamn heart Steve's ever seen.

He's the kid who shouldn't be crying, because he shouldn't have a reason to, because he shouldn't have gone through what he did, because he's just so *good*.

“What if I'm like this because I'm still linked to it.” Will's wavering tone breaks Steve out of his thoughts, and his voice is so small and low that Steve almost doesn't hear it.

Steve furrows his brows and frowns. “Will...”

“I've been thinking about it lately...y'know, why I'm like this. And what if...” Will pauses, stuffing his hands in his pockets and letting a few more tears go. “What if somehow, someway, I'm still connected

to it? What if I end up hurting someone?" Will inhales sharply, and Steve can see Will finally turn to look at him. "What if it's just a reminder that I'll never part ways with it? I know mom and Jonathan said they had got rid of it, but did they really?"

"Will, where the *hell* is all this—" Steve tries to interject, but Will doesn't even register the older teens voice and continues to go on instead.

"We barely know anything about it. We don't know what else it could do or how else it can hurt people or stay attached to people. What if it found another way? I know The Gate is closed, but what if it somehow opens a new one? Aren't there more kids who can do what Eleven can? What will we do then?"

Steve is silent for the next few moments, because the words stun him more than they should. And not because it's too much to process, no. It's because Steve's just been hit with the daunting realization that this is a daily thing for Will: Worrying. Feeling Terrified.

And shit, that hits him in the gut so hard.

"Listen to me," Steve starts when he can finally find his voice, "You're in middle school. You're...you're supposed to be worrying about things like what you should wear to some stupid school dance, or how to style your hair. What things you you want at the store, what you want for your next birthday..."

Steve leans back, the bench squeaking against his weight. "You're just a kid. A *kid*. You shouldn't be scared to be out past 8PM, or have nightmares that keep you up at night, or have thoughts like..." Steve waves his hands around, "Like... *that*. And you know what? You don't have to be scared, because the monster is gone, okay? It's gone, Will. You need to stop talking like that. You're okay. Your family's okay. Your friends are okay. I know it's scary, alright? God, I know. But the monster would piss its pants if it ever had to face you or any of the others ever again."

Will shoves his hands into his jacket pockets. "But I—"

"Will," Steve stops him from going any further, "You're gonna get

through this.”

“And how do you know that?” Will’s bottom lip trembles, and he hangs his head to presumably hide his red and puffy face from Steve.

Steve frowns, putting an arm around Will in comfort. He goes to mutter his answer, but the second Will is in his embrace, he leans into Steve’s chest and starts to sob.

Knowing that right now all Will wants is to cry and not hear Steve speak, he stays silent and lets him do just that.

But his answer still stands.

He knows Will will make it through it because Will is genuinely the toughest kid he’s ever met.

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“So this is your big plan?” Will asks from across the table, looking at Steve with a plain expression.

Steve outstretches his hands, gesturing to the many different flavours of ice cream that are placed in front of them. “It’s something we haven’t tried, isn’t it? Maybe this is the the key to it all.”

And although it doesn’t come across due to his little wiggle in an attempt to make Will laugh, Steve really is praying to God that it is. It’s been just under a month, and watching the life slowly drain out of Will is more unbearable than he lets himself admit.

“Yeah, yeah,” Will sighs, “You said that all the other times.”

Steve doesn’t reply to that because it’s not like it’s refutable, so he just picks up a random bowl and hands it to Will instead, grabbing one for himself and digging in.

It’s quiet between the both of them for a little while, noises from various tables around the joint, coupled with the sound of the register

opening and closing after each customer orders, ringing loudly in Steve's ears. He glances at Will from time to time, but he can only hold his gaze for a few seconds before it drops back down to the bowl of ice cream in front of him.

It's not like he did this to Will, or that he's trying to be selfish about the whole situation and act like he has it worse (because, God, he knows he doesn't), but not being able to take all of the burden away from Will in a heartbeat has Steve feeling guilty. He can't do anything. He's stuck. Steve just has to sit and wait for something, anything, to happen, and it makes him feel like he isn't doing enough.

"Ugh," Will suddenly sticks out his tongue and scrunches up his face, pushing the bowl that's in front of him closer to Steve. Steve quirks an eyebrow and pauses his movements of stirring around the icecream in his own bowl, watching as Will picks up a napkin and wipes his mouth.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing, I just hate mint ice cream," he mutters, "I couldn't even tell it was mint. Why is it *brown*?"

Steve freezes instantly, mouth agape and too many thoughts rushing to his head at once for him to handle.

No way.

"Oh my god." Steve finally breaths out, Will looking towards Steve and furrowing his brows once he realizes the expression on the older teen's face. "*Will...* "

"What?" he questions, "What is-"

"The mint," Is all Steve can say, and it looks like that's all he really had to say, anyway, because the expression on Will's face changes immediately, and he looks down at the bowl before tugging it back towards him and shoving a spoonful in his mouth.

The look of relief on Will's face demolishes every negative thought Steve's had throughout the past few weeks, and he smiles as Will

shovels up more ice cream onto his spoon.

"I hate mint," he declares, "I *hate* mint!"

Despite the comment, the biggest smile is resting on Wills face, and Steve finds himself hoping that nothing would ever try to take it away from Will again.

"I told you it'd work out," Steve gets up from his seat, "I told you you'd be fine, because—" Steve's cut off mid sentence by a huff leaving his mouth, and it takes his brain a second to comprehend that he's stumbled off balance because Will had jumped up from his own seat, rammed into him, and is now holding onto his waist tightly.

He looks down at the kid as he squeezes his torso, and his hands stay up in the air because *what the fuck, how is he supposed to react to this?*

"Thank you." Wills voice wavers, and Steve briefly wonders if he's crying, his thoughts confirmed when Will starts sniffing. "*Thank you.*"

Steve places his hands on Wills shoulder and squeezes reassuringly. "No problem, kid." and then, "But, if you get tears on my shirt, I'm gonna kill you."

Will snorts against his chest. "Yeah, *sure*, Steve."